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Public transit needs a future

The governor would shift funds to other uses. Here's one way to pump some back.

By Mike Feuer

FOR ANYONE who endures Los Angeles' endless rush hour, this year's state budget negotiations are hurling California toward some crucial choices:

Do we raid public transit funds — even as we strive to reduce traffic congestion and combat global warming? Do we shift the state's transportation funding priorities away from freeways toward subways, light rail and busways?

California voters understand the depth of our transportation crisis and how to work our way out of it: According to a recent poll, voters now consider public transit the solution to our congestion woes by a margin of 3 to 1.

It is surprising that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is bucking this trend, especially given his efforts to slow climate change. The governor's proposed budget would swipe \$1.3 billion from public transit next year. Worse, he has

proposed taking \$600 million in bonds voters recently approved for new transit projects and using that to backfill funding for those already in the pipeline.

Just the threat that the governor's proposal might be adopted is affecting transportation decisions: This month, the California Transportation Commission may postpone allocating the \$314 million necessary to complete the first phase of Los Angeles' Exposition Line, the much-anticipated light rail project between downtown and Culver City.

The \$1.3-billion raid of transit funds — strongly supported by Republican legislators — is the biggest device the governor has proposed to balance his budget. Given the amount at stake, all sides will have to compromise. To limit cuts to indigent children and blind and disabled people, for instance, some of the governor's huge hit to transit may have to stand. But there is much we can do to prevent consigning ourselves to perpetual gridlock.

A solution centers on a pool of funds known as the "spillover," which grows when gasoline prices jump, and its potential relationship to Proposition 42, the California initiative mandating that all gas sales tax money be spent on

transportation.

Established under Gov. Ronald Reagan, the spillover is a fund based on the amount by which gasoline sales tax revenue exceeds the amount generated by the sales tax on all other goods. By law, all spillover money is to be spent only on public transit, under the premise that when gas prices are high, buses and trains are more important than ever and cost more to operate. This year, however, as part of his \$1.3 billion budget-balancing scheme, the governor proposes to siphon off hundreds of millions of spillover dollars.

For the long term, we need an entirely different vision. To start, rather than leave the spillover so vulnerable to short-sighted budget maneuvers, we could place it under the protection of Proposition 42. The infusion of spillover money — estimated at nearly \$4 billion over the next three years alone — would bolster support for a second, larger step: changing Proposition 42's anachronistic allocations formula. Currently, only 20% of Proposition 42 funds are dedicated to public transit and 80% principally to state highways and local roads. A two-thirds vote of the Legislature could give priority (or at least parity) to public transit for the first time.

Imagine the effect in Los Angeles. Changes like these could bring us \$200 million or more in new public transit funding next year alone. Put another way, only two years of such an increase would fund the state's entire contribution to the Exposition Line, including its extension to Santa Monica.

A version of this idea emerged from the Assembly subcommittee I chair. It awaits discussion during budget deliberations. As with any proposal of this magnitude, it spurred controversy. Many city and county governments resisted any change they believed would benefit transit at the expense of local roads. But here's the key: With so much additional spillover money available, it is possible both to increase public transit's share and make plenty of revenue available to local governments.

Of course, automobiles — ideally powered by clean fuels — will have their place in the California of tomorrow. If we make the right moves now, however, we can give Californians better public transit alternatives.

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